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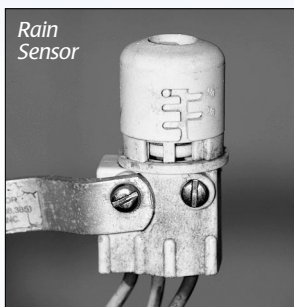
Sensible Sprinkling in South Florida

MAY 1, 2001

The South Florida Water Management District

is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts.

Our Mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems, and water supply.



Rain sensors make sense, plus it's the law!

Florida Statutes (Ch. 373.62) now require that "any person who purchases and installs an automatic sprinkler system shall... install a rain sensor device or switch which will override the irrigation cycle of the sprinkler system when adequate rainfall has occurred."

While this applies to all new automatic sprinkler installations, every system should have one!

Saving a Little Saves a Lot

For home and business landscapes, many South Florida residents irrigate to keep grass green year-round and tropical plantings looking tropical. As much as 70 percent of home water use is for outdoor watering or irrigation. Whether sprinkling water comes from a municipal supply, a well, or another source, it's still ultimately drawn from one big South Florida "pool." To share the resource, South Floridians need to conserve water.

There are many ways to water your landscape – from hose "dragging" to automatic sprinkling. There are benefits to using the hose. Water can be directed to specific plants within a bed, sprinkled on seedlings, or applied deeply to planted trees or shrubs. To conserve water, always use a shut-off nozzle at the end of the hose. Using drip and soaker hoses also reduces evaporation and conserves water.

To save time and increase efficiency, many residents install automated sprinkler systems. Systems vary widely in complexity. Simple water computers costing only about \$30 can regulate home sprinklers. More complex systems may be professionally installed. Any automatic sprinkler can save water if set correctly. Saving water also saves money.

To use water most efficiently, set sprinkler timers to water in the early morning when winds are usually light and the ground is cool and receptive.



Do All Lawns Need Irrigation?

All plants need water. Rainfall provides enough water for Florida's native plants growing in the wild. During Florida's normally dry winters, these native plants thrive in the residential landscape as well. However, limited areas of turf grass, flower beds, and accent plants usually need added water at some times during the year. When watering turf grass, water thoroughly so water will reach deeper portions of the soil. Deeper grass roots will develop and grass will stay greener and healthier during droughts. Watering infrequently with the right amount of water is better than watering frequently in small amounts.

What Plants Make the Most Sense...and Scents?

Many plants have low irrigation requirements and, once established, need very little water even during periods of drought. Choose your plantings wisely. Seek input from your county's agricultural extension agent and other resources including the South Florida Water Management District (<http://www.sfwmd.gov>) and the Florida Native Plant Society (<http://fnps.org>) websites.

Many native drought-tolerant plants can make your landscape wildlife friendly. Plants that attract and nurture butterflies add tremendous appeal to your yard. Ideas can be found at the North American Butterfly Association's website (www.naba.org) which includes gardening suggestions for regions of the country including a plant list of South Florida plants that grow well and attract butterflies native to our area.



How Can Existing Irrigation Systems Be Improved?

Enormous amounts of water are wasted in Florida. Incorrectly adjusted automatic sprinkler systems over-water lawns, paved areas and already rain-soaked soils and plants that may already be drought-tolerant by nature. Check your system and find out how (or who to call) to put the right amount of water where it is needed. Local hardware, plumbing stores, plant nurseries, and agricultural extension offices have experts on hand to answer questions about proper irrigation of Florida yards.

The first step to greatly improve an automatic sprinkler system is to install a rain sensor (described on the front). Why water your lawn when nature is doing it for you? Home supply stores stock rain sensors for \$20-30. The rain sensor tells the system when rains have already provided adequate water. It disables the systems until drier conditions return. An effective rain sensor should do the following:

- Override automatic sprinkler systems after significant rain has fallen.
- Disable the system during and after rainfall as the area dries out.
- Reset the system to the original schedule when water is needed again.

Although different types of rain sensors are available, they all achieve the same results. They save significant amounts of water.

Maintenance Can Save Water, Too

Your irrigation system will need to be checked regularly. Are any pipes or fittings leaking? Are any spray heads clogged? Are any spray heads watering driveways, sidewalks, or other pavement? Does the rain sensor properly interrupt the irrigation cycle after rainfall? Stopping any leaks, cleaning out any clogs and directing water to spray only where it's needed can prevent hundreds of gallons from being wasted every week.

Using mulch helps save water, too. Mulches in the landscape:

- shade soils from direct sun so they stay moist longer.
- protect soils from erosion.
- limit weed growth.
- slowly decompose, adding nutrients in the process.
- provide habitat for beneficial soil organisms.
- are appealing, adding a clean and unifying appearance.

The best mulches for Florida come from non-native trees, recycled waste wood, including wooden pallets, and your own recycled yard clippings. These are regularly available from home supply stores, and should always be sought. Mulch made from native cypress trees doesn't make sense. Why remove a beneficial native tree from the environment only to grind it up and sprinkle it around your yard?

Mulch should be spread two to four inches thick with new mulch added as needed to maintain an adequate layer. New mulch should be stirred into the older matter to help maintain healthy soil conditions and prevent matting. Mulches shouldn't pile up directly against foundations of buildings since they may attract termites.

Once established, your water-conserving yard may require only moderate amounts of added fertilizer. Over-fertilizing aggravates pest problems and stimulates excessive growth, which may induce a need for more frequent watering. Also, fertilizers shouldn't be spread onto slopes and drainage areas where polluting runoff could flow into waterways. Slow-release fertilizers make sense since they don't need to be applied frequently and any resultant runoff will only contain small amounts of dissolved nutrients.

For more maintenance information, visit the University of Florida's web site: <http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/turf/residential/residential.htm>

Be a Watchdog for Water Conservation

Whether irrigating a home lot or a large commercial property, everyone needs to closely monitor outdoor water use. Watering less frequently but thoroughly will help lighten the load on both pocketbooks and the shared regional pool of water. When developing landscape designs, keep water conservation in mind. Only constant water awareness will help maintain a constant water supply!



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Florida Keys
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